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## Forces 2008

Scott Yarbrough  
*Collin College*

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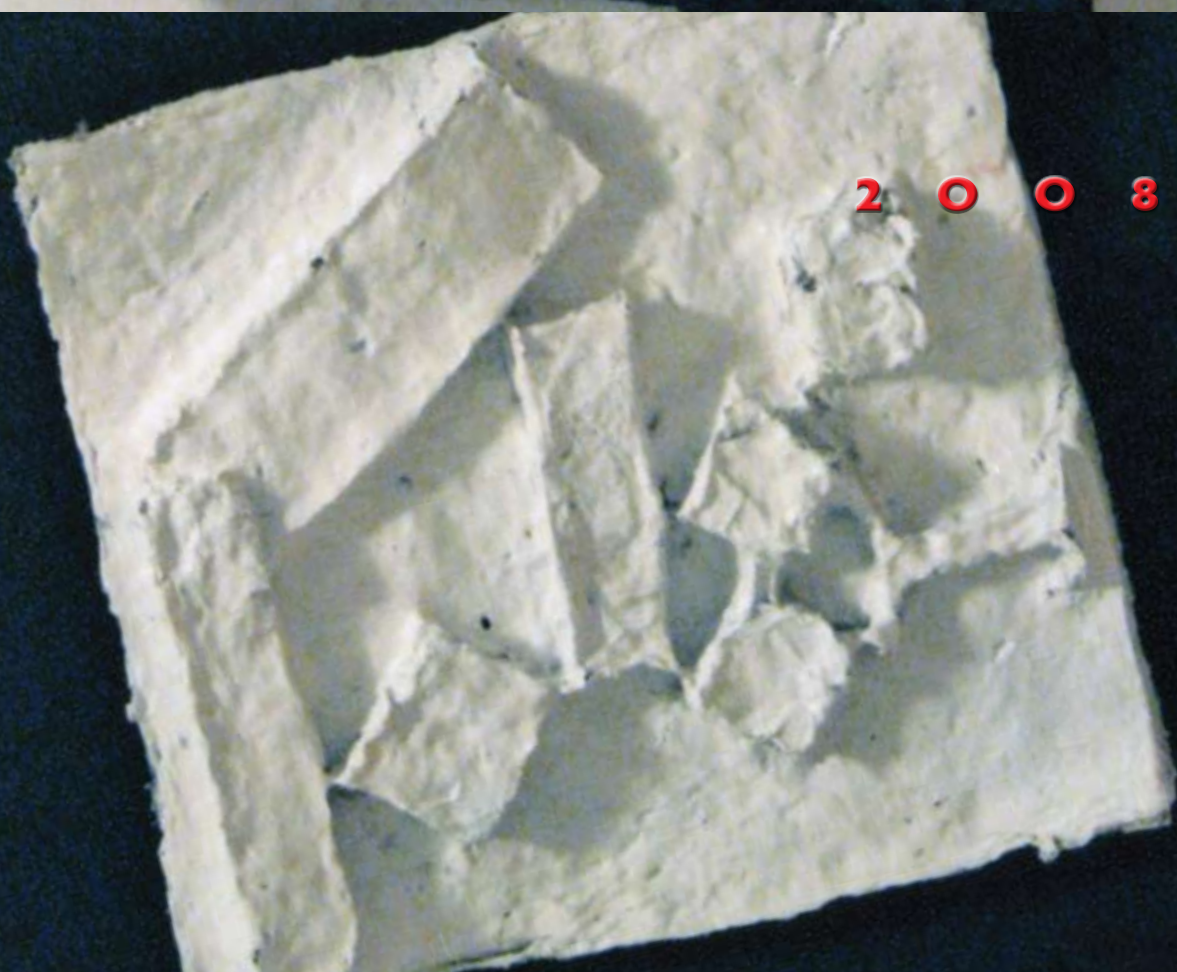
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F O R C E S



2 0 0 8

iii	<b>Introduction</b>
	<b>Paper Sculpture</b> Amy Bishop
1	<b>Hummingbird</b> Sydney Portilla-Diggs
	<b>Bereft</b> Tracy Dicks
2	<b>Dulcinea</b> Mirtha Aertker
2 • 3	<b>I am Afraid</b> Allison Smith
3	<b>This</b> Jessica Rogalski
4	<b>When Did I Fall In Love With You?</b> Mary Baumgartner
	<b>Missed A Spot</b> Jennifer Triggs
5 • 10	<b>A Stray</b> Lisa Torcasso Downing
6	<b>Basket</b> Justin Houston
	<b>Autumn 2001</b> J.P. Reese
8 • 9	<b>Pottery</b> Beverly Fetterman

iii	<b>Introduction</b>
	<b>Paper Sculpture</b> Amy Bishop
1	<b>Hummingbird</b> Sydney Portilla-Diggs
	<b>Bereft</b> Tracy Dicks
2	<b>Dulcinea</b> Mirtha Aertker
2 • 3	<b>I am Afraid</b> Allison Smith
3	<b>This</b> Jessica Rogalski
4	<b>When Did I Fall In Love With You?</b> Mary Baumgartner
	<b>Missed A Spot</b> Jennifer Triggs
5 • 10	<b>A Stray</b> Lisa Torcasso Downing
6	<b>Basket</b> Justin Houston
	<b>Autumn 2001</b> J.P. Reese
8 • 9	<b>Pottery</b> Beverly Fetterman

19 • 21	<b>My Indian Childhood in Oklahoma</b> Kathy Allen
20	<b>The Hem</b> Susan Blick
	<b>Handwriting</b> Molly Boyce
22	<b>Optical Lenses</b> Ashley Coble
23 • 25	<b>When Is Art?</b> Scott Robinson
25	<b>Sculpture</b> Jon Russell
26	<b>Dreams</b> Denise Durian
26 • 27	<b>Self Portraits</b> Justin Houston
27	<b>New and Old</b> Sandra Herron
28	<b>Little Pinch</b> Toni Hubbard
28 • 29	<b>Ode to Normalcy and Routine - ODE 3</b> Brian Shade
30 • 31	<b>Tear</b> Jim Crawford
	<b>Melting My Shadow</b> Tracy Dicks

32	<b>Frames</b> Ashley Cable
33	<b>The Master's Work</b> Cinde Matkin Rawn
34 • 35	<b>T-Shirt</b> Olga Y. King
35	<b>Wire Sculpture</b> Tab Green
36	<b>Ode to the Working Man</b> Nicholas Bennett
	<b>Sculpture</b> Jon Russell
37	<b>Hidden Burro</b> Justin Houston
38	<b>Skin-Pleasure: Mother - Genetics</b> Tiffany Herron
38 • 39	<b>Limbo</b> Mirtha Aertker
39 • 41	<b>Jesus, Squirrelly and Starbucks</b> Julie Calderara
42	<b>Overwhelmed</b> Tracy Dicks
43 • 44	<b>Why Students Drop</b> Ted McFerrin R. Scott Yarbrough

INTRODUCTION



PAPER SCULPTURE Amy Bishop

Collin College is a poster child of diversity; anyone who studies here is immediately faced with discussions which prove quickly that we are each distinctively individual, yet somehow all still part of a unified global journey. Forces 2008 has a multicultural voice featuring sneak peeks from an American Indian childhood in Oklahoma to a "radical" young girl's coming of age in the 80's "Thaw" of Moscow, from a profound view of a "Masterwork" to a squirrel that has something to do with Jesus and Starbucks. Most works reflect that we are simply on a daily journey to fit into our own skin while shedding the cocoon of our childhood.

R. Scott Yarbrough  
Editor of FORCES Literary Magazine



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institution that does not discriminate on the  
basis of race, color, religion, age, sex,  
national origin, disability or veteran status.

BEREFT Tracy Dicks



Hummingbird  
**Hummingbird**

Sydney Portilla-Diggs

It was in your nature  
To flit from  
Bloom to bloom.  
Because of this,  
You were only  
In my life  
For the briefest of moments.  
Still we loved . . .  
And to love you  
Was fast  
And searing  
And chaotic.  
I'd like to think  
That you hovered  
Nearer to me because  
I had the  
Sweetest nectar.



DULCINEA Mirtha Aertker

# I am Afraid

Allison Smith

I am afraid of bony fingers  
And if they are cold, it's even worse.  
I can feel them around my neck already.  
  
A nervous hand, I'd chop off my arm.  
Watch how still I am in the water, I barely make a wave.  
If I leave the water running, I can't hear your voice,  
So I haven't bathed for days.  
I'd recognize your voice if you were behind me.

Turn around.

I love your voice  
Imprinted in my head,  
Each inflection like a filthy hand  
On a white wall.

If you say you love me,  
I'll drown.  
If you say you love me,  
I'll destroy  
Everything.

I've seen rain and fire  
Together.

In the rain  
a woman in a flannel nightgown, blue and white flowers  
Dripping into each other,  
Watching her house  
Burn.

This is when I need you most.

Blue haze, thick smoke, your unwavering hand cupped over my mouth.  
I am not screaming.  
I am not suffocating.  
I cannot be turned to ash.

The Cantonese custom of exhumation:  
After seven years, the bodies of the dead are exhumed  
And the bones are scraped and cleaned and sent to the village of origin.

Where shall I send myself?  
Who will claim my life?

The lines of my palm are deep.  
They dig below the surface of my skin  
Inscribe my bones  
And crack  
Like dried mud.

Buried in these cracks is the history of my life.  
Break me in half and you will find yourself in the marrow  
That spills to the floor.

Like water.  
Like an ocean.  
Superfluous.

A flood that will tear leaves and limb, and rot will change  
my form.  
You'll pull the marigolds that flourish in the meadows,  
Each yellow flower will smell of my flesh.

I believe in desire.  
I believe in memory.  
I believe I can be whole again.

# This

Jessica Rogalski

This is how I fade,  
Light bleeding into dark.  
Starring at my reflection, seeing  
Lines and edges, blurry  
Ego tangled with regret.

This is how I shout,  
Against all instincts that hold me back.  
Fighting to keep my voice.  
One voice, the only voice.



When Did I Fall in Love  
With You?

Mary Baumgartner

Was it that early September day,  
When as we spent time by a quiet lake,  
You heard my call and came my way  
Your arms the drowning child to take?

Maybe it was at the end of that evening.  
When in your eyes I saw the longing  
To give your love to those around you,  
Until the loneliness would no more abound you?



MISSED A SPOT Jennifer Triggs

Or was it that time when I ceased crying,  
Because in the endless depth of your blue eyes,  
That day I found myself forever smiling,  
My heart so full of joy that it could touch the skies?

Perhaps it was the day I felt alone inside,  
And I could think of no one else but you.  
And when I found you by my side,  
My soul's search ended and I felt so new?

I know not when my love for you began.  
I know that I'll never find someone like you again.  
For it is God who joins soul to soul.  
And God is love by you I once was told.

A Stray

Lisa Torcasso Downing

LEORA HOISTED HER SLACKS AT THE KNEE **AND DROPPED TO THE GROUND.**

With her bottom stuck straight up in the air, she peered under the shed and clucked, "Here, Kitty," then went still, not even breathing as her eyes darted back and forth, hunting for the stray that had attacked her for no good reason. Why, all Leora'd done was turn the hose to the tomatoes when out from under that shed jumped a black fur ball, making the most god-awful sound. From where I stood, it looked to nearly cause Leora — well, there ain't no polite way to say this — to nearly wet herself. I could've laughed 'til high noon, but I knew Leora wouldn't take kindly to that, so I kept right on picking myself some tomatoes from her garden while she grabbed Roy's old rake from inside the shed.

Now, Leora never was soft on inedible animals, especially strays, and I could see she had no intention of letting that little beast terrorize her garden. She fisted that rake and lowered herself so that her cheek set right in the dirt beside the shed. It was clear as anything that she meant that little homeless cat no good. Problem was, she couldn't make out exactly where under the shed the animal was hid. That shed was one of those assemble-yourself, aluminum contraptions — just the kind of thing Roy'd buy — but he didn't trouble to flatten the land before he screwed it together. Needless to say, it didn't set level. So Roy took himself a wheelbarrow and borrowed some bricks left over from the church addition. When he hoisted up the far side, he created a gloriously dark crawl space for critters in the family way and saddled Leora with her current strife.

It was dark as Hades under that shed and so was the cat. Though Leora made some valiant pokes under there with the rake handle, she just couldn't get a good smack on the thing, much less scare it off. One thing about Leora, she ain't easily discouraged. One thing about me? Well, I'm not stupid. I got my tomatoes, said my "thank-yous," and "va-moosed" out of there before she dragged me into her battle with that wild kitten.

The way Leora tells it, she'd been flat on her belly for more than an hour, fishing around like that for a solid hunk of cat, blindly chasing hissing sounds, and — I'm certain, though she ain't likely to admit it — cursing up a storm. All of a sudden, out of the blue, behind her she says she heard a fence plank groan.

So, she glanced back over the rake tines and found that little Winnie Fletcher had clambered up the back side of her fence and was standing on the cross board, staring down at her through eyes as round as store-bought onions.

(continued on page 6, second column)

Autumn 2001

J.P. Reese

We always believed that spring would come;  
Believed that summer would flower again,  
Ill-prepared for this season of drought.

The Angel-Wing mounds in finished growth.  
Petals drop over the berm.  
Red cherries ripen under an Indian sun.

Apples firm for picking, their juice runs tart, cool  
Over our tongues. Seed rests in fallen fruit to spread  
The possible beneath this always uncertain earth.

We crate the remains of this final harvest;  
Wrap roots pulled from furrows in yesterday's news;  
Avert our eyes from its pictures of death.

We shoulder the leavings of all that is past.  
The end of the season begins.

(from page 5)

"Whatcha doin', Leora?"  
Leora let go the rake. "That's Mrs. Harper to you,"  
she said and pushed herself stiffly to her hands and  
knees. "You shouldn't be up there." She steadied herself  
by leaning against the shed wall as she got on her feet.  
"You get on down, you hear."  
"Why?"  
Leora wiped her palms against her pant legs.  
"Because it ain't safe."

"Why?"  
That just iced Leora's cake, this child questioning  
her like that. She picked up the rake and shook it at  
the girl. "Because I say so." Leora turned her back and  
marched toward the shed door. It was no secret that  
my dear, old friend had rued the day the Fletcher clan  
moved in next door, "all a hundred and ninety-three of  
them," as she liked to put it. Truth is, the Fletchers only  
had five kids, but they were home-schooled and fast-  
moving little creatures, so Leora got her fill of them after  
about a month of neighborliness.

And Winnie? That Winnie . . . Why, she was the  
worst of all.

"Precocious" is what the girl's mother called her. She  
bragged that Winnie had accepted Jesus when she was  
just three, said the child marched right down to the altar  
and told that preacher, "I'm saved!"

Leora leaned the rake against Roy's old smoker, just  
where they always kept it, and then backed out, closing  
up the shed door. She had her own word for  
what Winnie Fletcher was, but she was  
trying real hard not to say it anymore.

Winnie said, "I know you got a  
baby cat under there."

"That so?" Leora turned, looked  
up at the child. She told me the sun shone  
right in her eyes, but she didn't want the child  
to see her blink.

"Uh-hum. I know something else, too."  
Leora folded her arms. "Surprise, surprise."

"I know Jesus wouldn't like the way you're treating  
that kitten." And with that, Winnie leaped off the fence,  
leaving the slats to quiver like plucked guitar strings.

. . . . .

I can't say Leora is much of a talker, but she called  
me next morning, said how all night long, she tossed and  
turned. Couldn't sleep what with worrying about how  
Winnie was right. "No matter how ornery a creature is,"  
Leora said, "if God made it, I suppose it has a right to be  
treated respectable." She confessed she'd been awful to  
that little cat, even after Winnie skee-daddled. Not only  
had she tried to skewer it with a rake and flush it out with  
the hose, she'd shot at it with a can of Raid Roach Control.

"And it's too young to even skitter up the fence,"  
she said.

Now I could hardly believe my ears. It just didn't  
seem like Leora to fret so about a stray, but darn if  
she didn't get up out of bed and drive to the all-night  
Wal-Mart there in Mesquite, bought a big ol' bag of  
soft-chew Cats D'Light. Said she wore her robe and  
slippers right into the store. Then — she said it was after  
midnight — she poured cat food in the grass by the  
shed and went back to bed.

In the morning, the food was gone.  
Leora's bosom swelled with pride over her  
generosity. We could all see it, the way she walked into  
Bible study, walked around the block, walked through  
the grocery store with her chest all puffed out like she  
was a teenage girl who'd just discovered underwire  
braziers. Of course, it was Liddie Sykes who made the  
first wisecrack out loud. Something about how those  
Hollywood starlets wouldn't need boob jobs if they'd  
only find themselves a stray cat to cuddle. If it hadn't  
been so funny a thing to say, I might've shot back and  
defended Leora, but as it was, I just laughed. And I kept  
on laughing — we all did — and she kept on feeding  
that darn cat.

It was no surprise to any of us, except Leora, how  
fast that cat grew. Doubled its size in a week. Problem  
was, though, it never got any friendlier, at least not so's I  
could tell. Leora and me, we have this arrangement. I get  
fresh vegetables from her and she gets fresh, homemade  
bread from me. Not that bread machine junk with a crust  
as stiff as bark, but good, hand-kneaded honey wheat  
that let rise in my kitchen and cook on a stone. So I'm at  
her place fairly regular. I saw her try, really try, to make

nice to that cat. She fed it everyday, like I said, but she  
also stopped chasing it, swinging at it and hollering at it.

Still, every time I was over there, no matter how  
Leora tried to share her space with that cat, it'd arch its  
back. Shoot every hair straight up like a porcupine. And  
hiss? Why, that little fur-ball hissed something fierce at  
poor Leora. It was bad enough when the thing was tiny,  
but what with it growing so fast, I figured it just might  
someday sink its claws into Leora's throat. Draw fatal blood  
like its relatives the she-lion over there in Africa. But I didn't  
say nothing. Just watched, day by day, as the kitten grew.

Not 'til mid-August anyway, when we had that  
cold snap. Temperatures fell to, oh, I'd say about ninety  
degrees, so Leora and me, we fixed up some iced sweet  
tea and enjoyed the afternoon on Leora's front porch,  
fanning ourselves with folded newspaper and eating from  
a platter of sliced and salted tomatoes. All she wanted to  
talk about was that kitten. The way its eyes turned to dark  
slits and how its tongue turned white if it hissed a good  
long time. It was clear Leora's pleasure in doing right was  
curdling, even if she didn't let on to anybody else.

She poured me a second glass, and I commended  
her for taking on responsibility for one of God's creatures.  
She huffed, said nothing good had come of it, then  
added, "Isn't love supposed to win all?"

The words popped out without me thinking.  
"Do you love the cat?"

She gazed at me a while. The horse across the  
road whinnied. The Johnson boy drove by in his new  
Chevy truck. "Well, I might love it," she said, "with a little  
barbeque sauce."

I darn near fell over laughing, but the point was  
made. Leora decided to name the cat. Hissy. I said it fit.

But even named, that cat was a devil, spitting and  
hissing and gulping its Cats D'Light. Leora might have  
been able to endure if it weren't for Winnie's blue eyes  
constantly watching over that fence. A home-schooled  
child can have too much time on its hands, and Winnie  
was obsessing on Hissy. Leora complained that each  
morning, that child climbed her fence and stayed there  
nearly all day, singing and talking and cooing, trying to  
coax Hissy out from under that shed.



BASKET Justin Houston



Poor Leora. Anytime she went to do some gardening, there was that cat — hiss, hiss, hiss — and there was that girl upon the fence — yap, yap, yap.

"Leora," Winnie would say, "you ever give Hissy milk?" And I'd hear about it.

"Leora, why don't you ever smile at Hissy?" And I'd hear about it.

"Leora, who teaches pet store cats to be nice? You suppose people teach 'em, or do mother cats?"

"Leora, do cats go to Heaven?"

Leora told Winnie that Hissy was sure to go to hell. "Cats are like people," she said. "Some good, some bad. The wheat and the chaff. That's how God made it."

"So you think God made Hissy a bad cat?"

Winnie was sassing her — I say so, too.

"I leave it to Him" was all Leora said before she stomped inside to call me.

I listened to the whole story, then settled Leora down — again. But this time I told her everyone saw the situation for what it really was: Here was this no-good cat, every day pitching a hissy-fit, and there was Leora patiently caring for it even though it didn't deserve none. I told her all that hissing only highlighted the kind of woman she was, and not to let it get her down. She thanked me, said what I'd said would send her to her evening prayers comforted, and would I stop by tomorrow and relieve her of some bell peppers? I promised to oblige. Went to bed feeling right comforted myself.

'Course there was no suspecting the morning. The wind kicked up, TV said gusts at thirty-five miles an hour, which I figured to be a sign fall was falling, so I was glad. Leora never liked wind, but then she's always kept her hair too long. Down to her shoulders, even at her age. I waited at her kitchen table while she rummaged in the junk drawer for a rubber band. She said her fingers were stiff, so I made her pony tail, and we headed out back.

Right away, we heard the wind playing Leora's rickety, old fence like a wooden harp. Not exactly music to pay money for, but we both knew that

sound was fixin' to cost her plenty in the way of a new fence. I was telling her about Chuck's wife's cousin with the fence business out in Forney when we neared the shed. Suddenly Leora turned rock hard, stopped in her tracks.

Oh my. That fence had been clattering so loudly that little Winnie Fletcher didn't hear us coming. We caught her, not that she knew, squatting next to the shed with Hissy rubbing up against her legs. Winnie laid her thumb right between the baby cat's eyes and stroked up. I swear I could feel fire burning in Leora's heart.

She marched right up to the girl, who spun around, but not before Leora had an old-fashioned hold of her ear. "Move," she barked. ' Course, Hissy was long gone.

"Let go!" The child squirmed, but Leora had a firm pinch. Ear dragging is all in the elbow. You have to hold your elbow just right. And Leora did that — through the gate and right on up to the Fletcher's front door.

I stayed on the sidewalk, figured this was Leora's battle, but I didn't miss nothing. You know those Fletchers got the smallest lot in town. A hop and skip from stoop to sidewalk. Not that that's important. Not everyone



makes a decent living. Regardless, soon as Mrs. Fletcher opened the door, Winnie spun free, boo-hooing. Clear as day, that Mrs. Fletcher stretched out like a mother bear protecting her baby.

I turned away, shaking my head, and not quite knowing what to do with myself. I'm not saying I didn't want to be there. Leora'd want me to stay, I knew that, or she'd have told me not to follow her when I did. But, well, I felt like the mother who waits in the car, waiting to see if her thirteen-year son scores his first kiss on his date's doorstep. Awkward.

"Is something wrong, Leora?" I heard Mrs. Fletcher say. Glancing over, I saw her scoop up her year-old boy, half-naked in a t-shirt and diaper. He banged on her chest.

"Winnie was trespassing," Leora said, and Mrs. Fletcher put the baby back down. "I caught her handling a dangerous stray."

Winnie's head popped out from behind her mother's back. "Hissy's not dangerous to me!"

Mrs. Fletcher glanced at me, then touched the top of Winnie's head and said, "Go on to your room."

The girl scooted away and the baby wailed and banged



on its mother's thigh.

"Wait, Win," the mother called. "Take Bubba."

"She could get hurt," Leora said as Winnie stomped back in.

"Leora," Mrs. Fletcher said, all sweet, as Winnie hoisted the baby onto her hip, "My daughter does have an affection for animals."

Leora told me later that the little darling with an affection for cats stuck out her tongue before carrying the baby down the hall.

"I'm very sorry Winnie troubled you," Mrs. Fletcher said, "but I have to tell you I've been concerned about this cat. Is it true you're feeding some wild thing you found under your shed?"

Leora straightened, said boldly and real loud (which I figured was for my benefit), "It seemed the right thing."

I took about four steps and came up beside her, so she wouldn't think she had to work so hard for me to hear. I tipped my head at Mrs. Fletcher, but she ignored me. Kept on talking.

"But the kitten hasn't had any shots."

POTTERY Beverly Fetterman



Leora stared at her blankly. I'm sure, toting up the cost of those shots.

"I don't like a stray being so near my children."

Leora got that same look in her eyes that she gets when she's fixin' to beat me in gin.

"Mrs. Fletcher," she said, "Hissy's not even big enough to climb the fence. Maybe if you kept Winnie on your side . . . ."

"I can do that," Mrs. Fletcher nodded, shifting her weight, "but just how long do you think you can keep that animal on your side of the fence?"

Leora hushed real fast, glanced at me. What was I supposed to do?

"Cats carry diseases, Leora. Parvo, dysentery, worms . . . ."

Leora looked Mrs. Fletcher square in the eye, then turned all of a sudden, and walked back across the Fletcher's weed lawn to her own home. I bid Leora's neighbor a civilized farewell, but added, "Climbing that old fence, it's just not safe."

The woman closed the door, but I was already moving after my friend.

I tried to tell Leora what was what, but she didn't want to talk about it. Just said, "Let's go to a movie." I asked which one and she shrugged, said I could pick.

I got out my car keys, and we stopped at my place first so I could pick up a sweater. The whole drive, I could tell that a part of Leora was real angry, being scolded like that by a woman half her age. But there was another part of her, too — that part that makes her get up in the middle of the night and buy cat food at the twenty-four hour Wal-Mart — that was thinking it all over. I took 80 west to the Starplex exit. We ate lunch at the McDonald's. Sat in back by the restrooms, nowhere near the playground, then we took in a Julia Roberts movie.

The next day, I saw Leora at the market and teased her. Was she buying more Cats D'light? She told me she had plenty of cat food left, but that she didn't think she'd feed Hissy today. "Oh," I said. I didn't know what else to say.

The day after, my phone rang and Leora asked me, "Could I stop by?" I said I wasn't baking 'til tomorrow, but she insisted.

When I got there, she picked up a half-empty bag of Cats D'Light and took me out by the shed. I waved at Winnie, who I could clearly see peering through the slats, then watched as Leora unlocked the shed. She walked deep inside and poured out some cat food pellets. As soon as we backed far enough away, Hissy darted out from beneath the shed, ran inside it, and pounced on the food. Leora dashed forward and slammed the shed door.

"Why'd you do that, Leora?" Winnie asked, all frantic, her left eye and nose showing through where a slat was missing.

Leora didn't answer, just snapped the lock, then led me back inside and used the telephone.

I sat with her, watching Fox News and talking about that missing pregnant woman. Two hours later, Animal Control rang the front bell. Leora answered it, said to meet her round back, where she explained everything to the catcher as he pulled a long pole with a wire noose on the end out of his truck. Leora opened the gate, worked the combination of the shed, then stepped back. I heard Winnie breathing hard behind the fence.

The cat hissed up a storm soon as the catcher stepped inside. He had a little trouble slipping the noose around Hissy's neck — the cat climbed up the aluminum and perched on an interior cross beam — but he got it. He swung the stray, still hissing and spitting, out of the shed, through the gate, and into a cage on the truck.

Winnie screamed and ran for her mother.

"Thank you," Leora told Animal Control, and he nodded. She offered him the half-empty bag of soft-chew Cats D'light, but he said they had a special brand they used at the shelter and not to worry. He climbed in his truck, but Leora stopped him. "You think she'll get adopted?"

The man kept his eyes on the steering wheel and shrugged. "Stranger things," he said, then turned on the ignition.

As the truck drove away, I slipped my arm around Leora's shoulder, told her she'd done the right thing. She nodded, then held up the bag of cat food. "What do I do with this?"

"Throw it out."

She grunted and smiled at the same time. "I think I'd like to see that movie again, the one from yesterday."

I understood. "But no McDonald's this time," I said, following her inside Roy's old shed. "Let's try that new Chinese buffet 'cross the highway."

She nodded, placed the cat food bag on the floor, then picked up the few tools — a wrench, a screwdriver, and I don't know what — that the catcher had accidentally knocked off the pegboard when he yanked Hissy out.

"Chinese. . . ." Leora wondered as she replaced the tools. "Do they eat cats?"

I laughed. It was wicked, but I laughed. "That's dogs," I said, "with Chinese barbeque."

She smiled and picked up the Cats D'Light. "You know, this stuff really stinks." She swung the bag toward my nose. I ducked, told her to knock it off.

"Chinese, it is," she said, then looked over at me, her eyes all smiling. "You think Winnie will survive?"

"Nope," I said, and we started walking toward the house. "So it's a good thing she's saved."

On the way into town, Leora asked me to stop by Helping Hands Thrift Store and Food Pantry. She marched straight to the back door, rang the bell, and handed off two things: A brown bag full of home-grown tomatoes, green peppers, and jalapenos, and, well, don't you think some poor family out there has a cat to feed?



MAMAW'S HOUSE Toni Hubbard

# In Memory

Susan Blick

Each time I tell myself  
I will not remember you,  
But thinking of you now,  
I travel down that path of memory  
Becoming trapped in the thicket,  
Where the barbs of the brambles  
Still exist, as pointed and sharp

As they ever were  
Piercing me to the bone  
And drawing blood anew.  
I struggle not to cry out,  
Not to slip inside mind's suicide  
Of self-inflicted thought,  
And so turn my attention  
Away from the deep woods  
As if to heal and scar,  
And I think I shall not  
Travel there again





# I Never Lived in the Colored South

Sydney Portilla-Diggs

I never lived in the colored south,  
But I caught the eye of  
An old pink man who did.  
My daughter and I sat  
In the shallow end of  
A country club swimming pool, and  
Under his critical gaze,  
I came to realize  
That we were the only lavender  
Family in the water.  
I wonder if that old pink man  
Longed for the time when  
It used to be an all-pink club.  
They would have  
Drained every last drop of water  
From the pool and had some colored  
Servants scrub it down with disinfectant  
If a colored stuck one toe in the water.  
Defiantly,  
And deliberately  
I held my breath  
And submerged  
My entire lavender body  
In the water.  
When I came up again,  
The old pink man was gone.



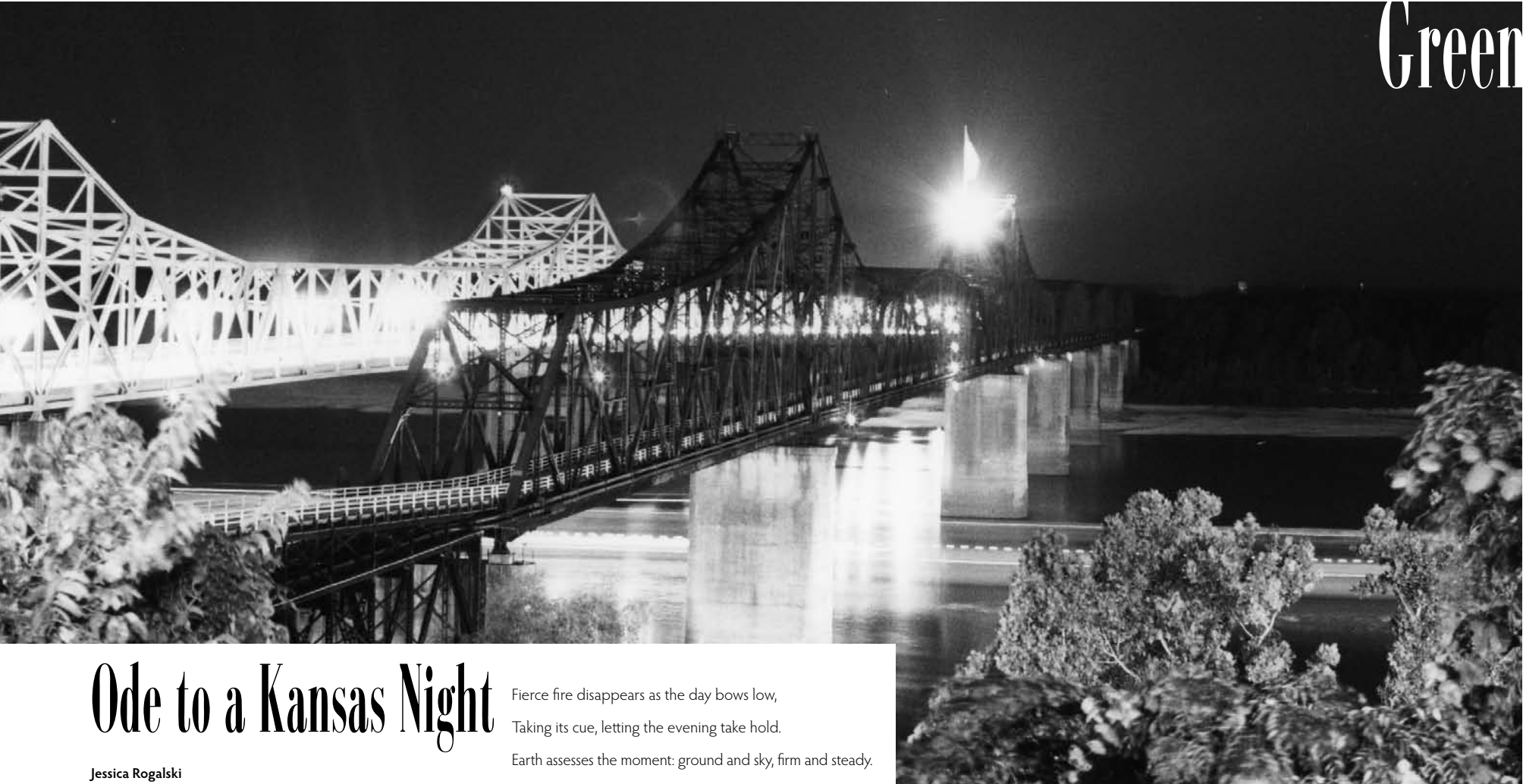
## Day's Beauty – A SONNET

Betsy Giron

The day gave up her beauty to the night  
And wrapped its shadowed shawl around her land  
Allowing those who dwell in simpler light  
To revel in their doings as she planned.  
Through one open eye she still sees the soul

Who masks by night the markings of their way  
Until, again, her radiance takes in the whole  
Of that which sin and vile left on display.  
For those who choose to see her golden face  
And live exposed to every fault within  
Are reminded of the need for her grace  
When viewed to remnants of night's shameful den.  
Then day's beauty seems even greater still  
Shining forth from those who gave to her their will.





# Ode to a Kansas Night

Jessica Rogalski

Mirthless trees bask in fading light,  
Surrounded by earth in shades of pine, amber, smoldering red.  
Admiring dying clouds of fading white,  
While an indifferent wind snaps around them.

Fierce fire disappears as the day bows low,  
Taking its cue, letting the evening take hold.  
Earth assesses the moment: ground and sky, firm and steady.  
Moon radiates, beaming through fading aura of sun.

Starfire abates,  
Swallowed by the horizon.  
While hazy sky melts into liquid black,  
Star flecks slowly dominate the night.

With a breath, I sink back into the frozen grass;  
Beneath the charcoal evening, everything is diminished.

# Green and White and Red

Anum Tahir

AS THE DAWN MIST MELTED INTO THUNDER CLOUDS **THE SOUND OF MOTORBIKES** became a roaring crescendo and a crowd of several thousand surged towards Pakistan’s border with India. Mounted police lashed out with bamboo canes and women and children screamed as they were crushed against a gate blocking the way to the ‘Wagah’ frontier crossing, fifty meters away.

“Pakistan Zindabad!” (Long live Pakistan!) bellowed the crowd, in between cursing the police. One man fell to the ground, blood pouring from his head, searching for his glasses amid a sea of lost shoes.

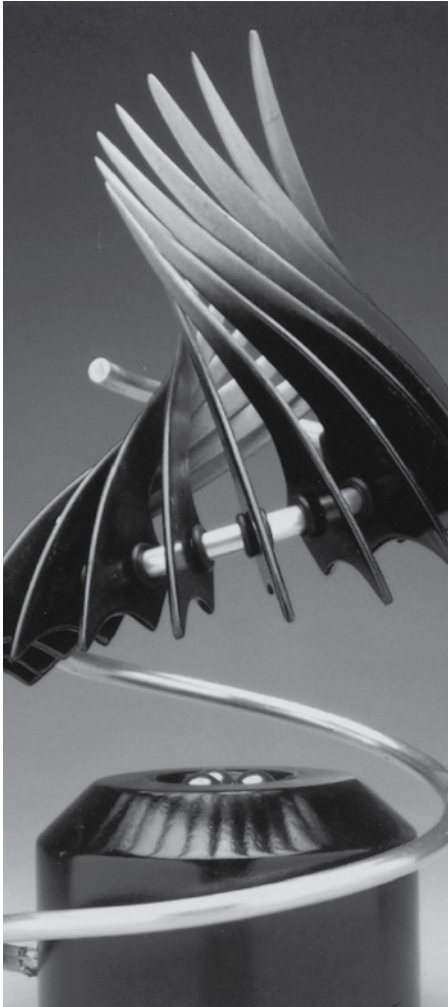
So began the Independence Day celebrations on the fourteenth of August along the line where Britain hurriedly divided the “Jewel in the Crown.” Sixty years ago on that day in history, triggered the biggest mass migration in history.

The prevailing atmosphere was actually more festive than aggressive — the crowds had come to see the ritual flag-raising ceremony by goose-stepping border guards in regimental finery. But the chaos and violence served as a reminder of the bloody scenes that followed Britain’s decision to split Punjab, one of its colony’s most populous and prosperous regions, down the middle.

Pakistanis celebrated their nation’s sixtieth birthday on Tuesday, the fourteenth of August, 2007 with celebratory gunfire and colorful displays of national pride, pushing the problems of recent political turmoil and surging militant violence into the background for a day.

Tens of thousands of people rallied throughout the world’s second most populous Muslim nation waving Pakistan’s olive-green flag with a white crescent, while others held small prayer gatherings at home. Women daubed their forearms with elaborate henna-drawn flowers in national colors, and children ran through the streets late into Monday night setting off firecrackers.

And there I stood in front of the television thinking ...Independence Day reminded me of the time when on one thirteenth of August, many, many years ago, our dad brought all of us kids together and told us a story. He told us how he was a young



boy at the time of independence and how his mother stitched a Pakistani flag for him so he could go out and demonstrate with the Muslim League. He had proudly raised it at the demonstration despite being in a city that had seen its fair share of Hindu-Muslim riots. Then, he continued on to teach us what the different colors and the Chaand (Crescent) Sitaara (Star) on the Pakistani flag represented. Finally, my mom followed the tradition and stitched a large flag from green and white cloth for us kids to put up on our house. It was the largest flag at that time in our neighborhood and we proudly raised it on our house every year until I left for the US.

Even now we talk about it and what it meant for the entire family to raise the flag together. Given what is going on in Pakistan, I almost feel I need to be back there again, to raise a giant green and white flag to show that nothing can bind us together more than our common nationality.

One incident that left me devastated shortly before my migration was one that'll remain like a permanent scar on my mind. My neighborhood was going mad. Fireworks, horns, confetti, blaring music, excited screams of people—all the visible signs of a festive night were present. Everyone had been celebrating for twenty-four hours now. My city was going berserk. "Pakistan Zind-a-bad!" (Long live Pakistan!) screamed the jubilant people out in the streets and roads; the sixtieth anniversary of this country: Independence Day.

Screams. Shouts. Tooting and honking. Roars of motorbikes. Flares of fireworks. Background music in every store, mall, and elevator tuned to the patriotic mode. Public buildings glittered with colorful bunting and Pakistan's green and white national flag flew proudly from balconies, bicycles and cars as the country marked its sixtieth birthday.

Everyone was jovial.

I sat uneasily.

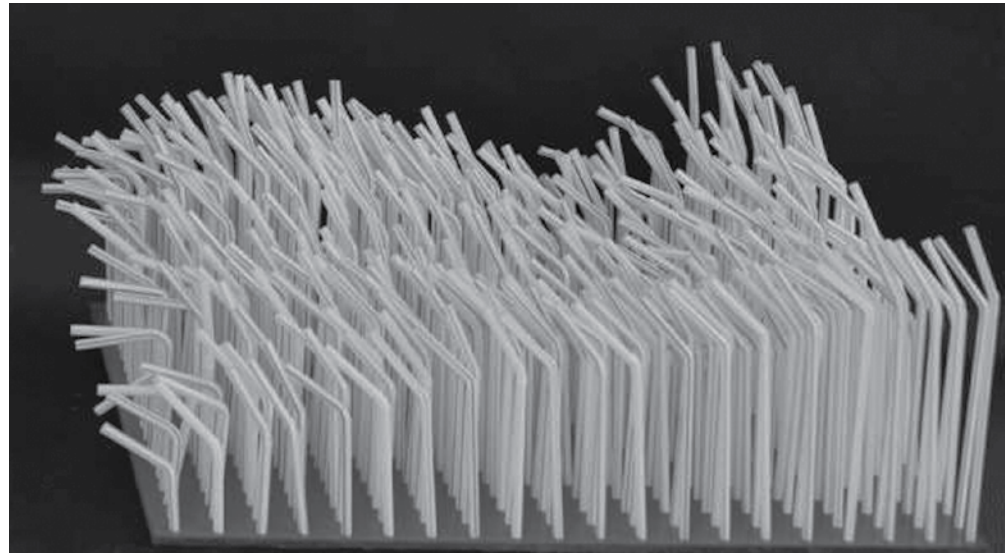
Don't get me wrong, the fourteenth of August is one of those few days I like to celebrate...though, of course, I do it in my own quiet way by tracing the wall of the balcony and terrace of my house with little candles. I love the interplay of dark and light it creates, after the sun sets in. And were you to look at my house from a distance, at eight in the night, a merrier sight would not greet your eyes. Some two hundred odd candles glittering and blinking in the dark, their flames glowing bright, reaching higher and higher, casting the glow on the walls, radiating warmth. No music. No loud horns. Just candles for me. My celebrations, be it for anything, were always subtle and quiet.

That night, however, my candles did not light. The wind kept on reaching out with its long lithe hands, pinching the flames between its two fingers. No candle burned.

People were celebrating. Raucous laughter seeped in my ears. I sat feeling restless and uneasy.

Why was everyone so unconcerned and wrapped up in themselves? Why were they being so selfish? Did they not see...My candles did not burn? Would not burn... for they mourn him.

The eleven-year-old boy selling green and white balloons, at the gas-station near my house; I have been seeing him there since last week.



REPETITION Tove Mercer

## Iraq

Molly Boyce

Assigned to me  
As to make sense of  
The insensible

A walk through time  
That lacks clarity  
Or visual density

Stumbling behind  
Dark painted masks  
In a sheer gray mist,

As Abraham's lamb  
Caught in the thicket,  
No instinct to resist,

Only swept up by fear,  
And marked for sacrifice  
On that pillar of cold stone

The eleven-year-old boy, working to make sure his family manages a meager meal once daily...or perhaps once every two days. I could not tell; he looked skeletal enough. The eleven-year-old boy longingly watching kids marching past holding flags, watching children running to the market to buy flags, badges, bunting and other Independence Day decorations. He must be wondering the meaning of the word "Freedom" and "Independence," I imagine. For him the word freedom only encompasses freedom from hunger and basic needs never fulfilled. Freedom from always struggling to survive, to stay alive.

The eleven-year-old boy I had been seeing daily, on my way back home, the same little boy with his picture in the paper that day, his fragile body bloody and lifeless, run over by a motorbike while the biker was performing an Independence Day stunt...and green and white balloon-skins spewed at his side. Bright red seeping through green and white. Bright red set brilliantly against the dull asphalt.

Green and white and red.

Shouts and laughter outside.

Green and white and red.

Happy Independence.

Green and white and red.

My candles would not burn.

My candles would not  
burn



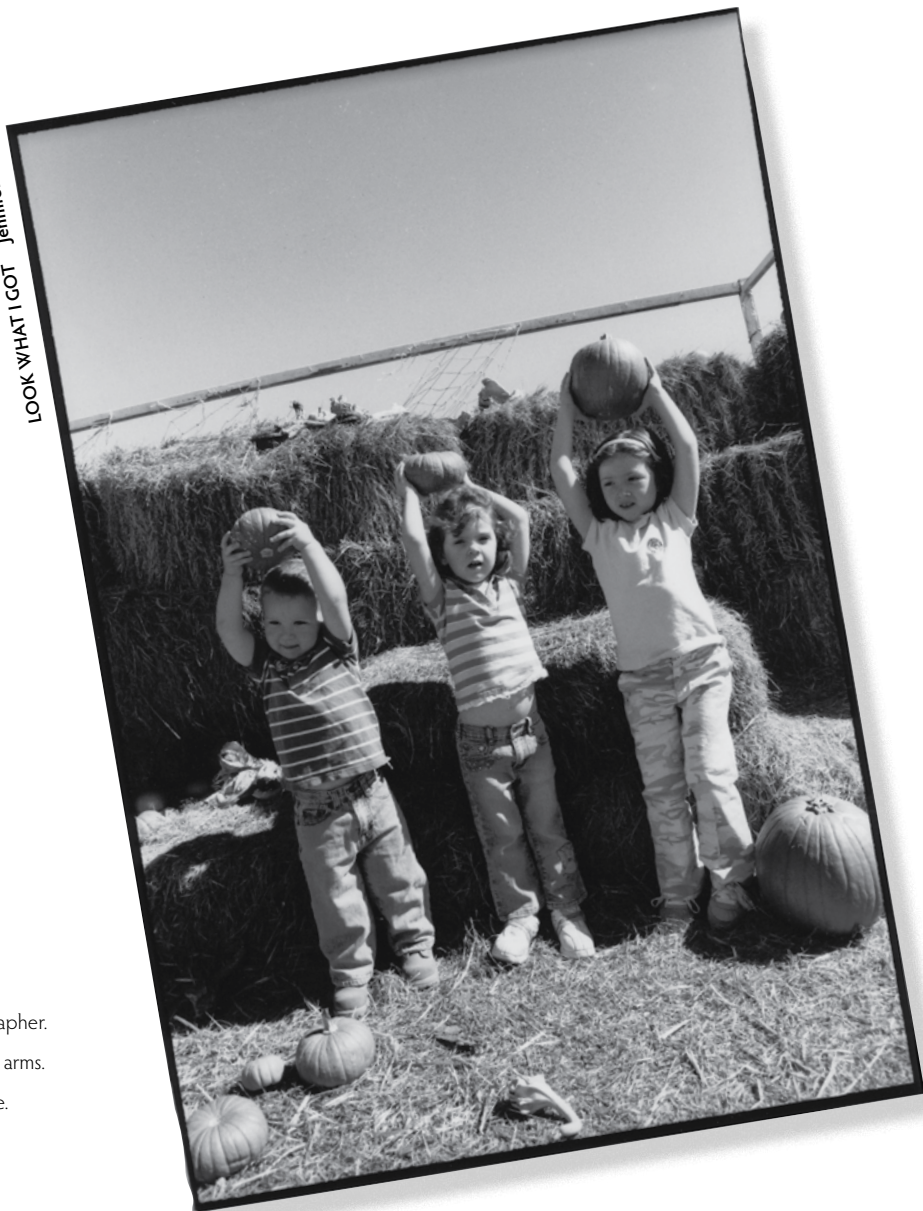
# Blue

## Misty Mix

Church railing is not the focus.  
Smiling face is not for the photographer.  
She is in her favorite spot: daddy's arms.  
Wind entices blonde hair to dance.  
Tree leaves stir up a melody.  
Eyes closed against the sun.  
If opened, reflections of delight would shine.  
Lace adorned blue dress and red stripped blue shirt all against a blue sky.  
The air must smell of country: fresh manure, honeysuckle, tilled earth.  
Sunlight in their faces illuminates much, but not all.

The lens again will never capture these two.  
Both gone now like the county background.  
City grows up around the old barn and church.  
Sunny day's peace broken by the transformation of change.  
Touch the print and touch death.  
The negative is all that remains.

LOOK WHAT I GOT Jennifer Triggs



# My Indian Childhood in Oklahoma

Kathy Allen

I STILL HAVE VIVID MEMORIES OF GROWING UP AMONG MY INDIAN RELATIVES IN OKLAHOMA. In the late '40s and early '50s, before I was born, the state of Oklahoma had started removing the Native Americans from the reservations. The Government had built several blocks of homes for them, all one-bedroom, and my father, who was part Comanche and part Creek, qualified for one of them. We lived there in a community of Comanche, Apache and Kiowa in Oklahoma City.

However, I spent much of my childhood visiting my grandparents, who lived out in the country on a farm. I can still remember my Great Grandmother Minnie, even though she died when I was a child. I can remember her long braided hair and how much she looked liked the other Indian women in my neighborhood.

My grandparents had much to do with the training and character building of their grandchildren. My oldest brother Roy and I, often with our cousins Susan and Janine, visited them on weekends to help with the farm work. Grandma Ruby Nell used to give each of us a bucket and sent us into the orchard to pick apples, peaches, pears and cherries, always with strict instructions not eat any of the cherries. After filling our buckets, we took them to her to wash and remove the stems.

Of course, we usually ate some cherries. When Grandma Ruby Nell asked us if we had, Roy always said "no," but she knew he was lying. She would then lead us out into the front yard and tell us to break a switch off the bush. If we selected a short, thin switch, she would walk out herself, choose a longer, thicker one, and switch us with it.

It took us a year or two to figure out how she always knew we were lying. You see, the house had no indoor plumbing, no bathroom with mirrors, just an outhouse.

After the new, modern bathroom was put in later, we could go inside, look in the mirror, and see the cherry stains all around our mouths!

Grandmother Ruby Nell taught me many practical lessons: cooking, canning and sewing. Since she happened to be my Sunday School teacher, she also made sure I learned my Bible verses. Because I had trouble learning to read—I would see the words all run together on the page—she developed a practical way of teaching me. She always had green beans from the garden for me to snap with her in the evening. We would sit on the front porch swing, and she would say, "Repeat after me: 'The Lord is my Shepherd.'" Then she would have me snap each end of the green bean. Then the next line: "I shall not want," and I would snap each end of another green bean. We would continue until I knew all the lines, and got the green beans snapped at the same time.

My grandpas were also important in my life. After my parents divorced, when I was eight, Grandpa Wall came to live with us. He worked with my father's dad, who had his own carpentry business. It was what every hyperactive girl needed, two grandfathers paying attention to her. They would often take Roy and me to work with them on Saturdays. I learned to sand baseboards and to use a hammer.

Grandpa Wall used to tell me, "If someone is willing to teach you something, you should learn it. You never know down the road of life when you might be able to use it." Both grandfathers told me that they didn't care what I did for a living when I grew up. I could be a dishwasher in a restaurant if I wanted to, but I must make sure to be the best dishwasher they had. "If not," they said, "the pay check doesn't belong to you."

(continued on page 20, second column)



# The Hem

Susan Blick

The fabric of a life laid flat  
Pattern pinned then trimmed by cookie cutter  
Edges raw and unrefined, folded in  
Crisply pressed with a hot iron  
And stitched together in latest fashion.  
I have been sewn nice and neat  
Within the current disguise,  
A tenuous thread  
Waiting to unravel.

# Handwriting

Molly Boyce

Risky business, this putting words to paper,  
Red blobs of throbbing ink, a stain against  
Your soul, proof indelible of conscious intellect  
And emotional barometer for all to gauge,  
Yet, I cannot keep this pen contained.

(from page 19)

My mother also demonstrated a strong work ethic. Finding herself divorced, with a small family and no work training, she began taking night courses in secretarial college. Meanwhile, she needed a job. She began working full time as a cashier at Turner's Grocery Store, just across the street from my elementary school. She made hot dogs every day, and we children could walk across the street and buy them for lunch as long as we sat on the grocery steps to eat them. The hot dogs cost five cents, and a 6-ounce cold Coca-Cola cost five cents. My mother would make the best hot dogs, with lots of chili, mustard, and onions. The kids at my school called her the Hot Dog Lady. She continued working there until she graduated from the secretarial college and got a job, as a secretary for an insurance company.

I worked in the neighborhood too. I did babysitting for the Indian families in my neighborhood, but I didn't get money. They always paid me with commodities, which were given to them by the state. In a circle on every item was a label that read, "Indian Reservation, Oklahoma." My payment would be perhaps a ten-pound sack of flour, a 10-pound sack of sugar, a can of powdered eggs ( which had a greenish color) and a small box of lard or a block of chocolate.

One day at school I overheard two girls talking about making a whole dollar fifty babysitting. I went home and told my mom. After listening to me, she said, "Let's get out what you made when you went to babysit the other night. Let's see, a sack of flour, a sack of sugar a large block of chocolate, powdered eggs, one pound of butter and a jar of honey. Well, it comes to seven dollars," she said. "Which is better, one dollar and fifty cents an hour or seven dollar's worth of groceries?" I never complained again!

As I started into the eleventh grade in 1970, our school offered beauty college classes. My mother enrolled me. I really wanted to take auto shop because I had helped my brother Roy work on his car. However, Southeast High had a policy that, although both girls and boys could take beauty college classes, auto shop was only for boys.

The first haircut I did in beauty college was on a mannequin head with very long, black hair. The mannequin heads were new that year. Our teacher, Mrs. Haul, placed each one of us in front of a station with a new mannequin head bolted on it. She then explained how to comb and section off the hair with hair clips and trim each section a half inch all over the head. She planned for us to trim just a small bit of the long hair.

I began sectioning and cutting, sectioning and cutting. I ended up giving a short page boy haircut, not at all what Mrs. Haul expected. As I finished it, Mrs. Haul walked by, stopped, grabbed my scissors and comb, and screamed, "Your Mother owes me eighteen dollars! These are new and were supposed to last for two whole years!" All the time I was thinking, I was right; auto shop would have been better for me. I said to myself, "Now I will be kicked out of beauty college and will have to pay for this mannequin head."

Then she paused, examined the cut, thought a moment, and said, "This is the best haircut I have ever seen from a first-time student; I have girls who have been here for two years and can't cut hair this good. From now on you will be doing hair cuts

and helping me teach the second-year girls." And that's exactly what I did. Every once in a while a neighborhood woman would bring me a picture of a hairstyle, and I had to teach the whole class how to cut hair by looking at a picture.

Mrs. Haul said I was a natural born hairstylist, just like her. She told me I would make a good instructor for a beauty college, and she wrote a letter to the well known Paul Barnes, who had written the book Cosmetology, used by the beauty college. Mrs. Haul asked him to let me into his college in Oklahoma City, and soon I was enrolled. I was successful in my studies and graduated with a diploma, largely through the help of Paul Barnes, who received permission from the State of Oklahoma to administer the manicuring test to me orally because of my vision impairment. I missed only one question out of one hundred and twenty five.

In the fall of 1970, Mr. Barnes got me my first job, at The Country Club Barber Shop, owned by a country western singer named Conway Twitty. I have to say I didn't like working in a barber shop at all. I did, however, meet an interesting man whom I introduced to my single mom. They have been married now for thirty-some years.

Soon my life took a new turn. Conway Twitty owned a number of businesses in Oklahoma City, including a boat business named Twitty Boats, a restaurant named Twitty Burgers, and a night club called the Georgie Girl's Lounge. My parents leased the lounge. When I quit my job at the barber shop, my mother thought I could work at the Georgie Girl's Lounge. She wanted me to tend bar and go-go dance. The lounge had a stage, and disco was really in at that time.

You might wonder if encouraging me to work at the lounge was a good idea, but my mother knew what she was doing. You see, I was very shy and very small. I weighed about ninety pounds. I wondered who would want to watch me dance. Furthermore, I was not a good dancer and did not want to be. My mother would say I had a lot of rhythm, but did not know what to do with it. My parents then hired a professional go-go dancer to teach me. It worked. I became an excellent dancer, gained confidence and danced at the lounge for six months. My mother was there to watch me.

I worked one night with a new bartender they had hired, a pre-med student at OU, in Norman. He wanted to work weekends only. We worked together for only three months on weekends and were married in 1971.

That year marked a major turning point in my life. My husband and I soon left Oklahoma. My old days with my Indian relatives were behind me, but I missed them. Everything seemed to remind me of home in Oklahoma. Trying to cheer me up, my husband once suggested, "Let's go to see the movie Terms of Endearment." We did. It was about a young woman who had been close to her mother, grew up, married, and came down with cancer. I cried.

Whenever I saw pictures of hills and mountains like those in Oklahoma, I cried. When we visited my family in Oklahoma for the holidays and had to leave, I cried. However, with the passing of months and years and with the birth of my own children, the sadness and longing faded away.

Eventually I learned to find happiness no matter where I was, but even today those memories of growing up in Oklahoma are still vivid and dear to me.

# When Is Art?

Scott Robinson



OPTICAL LENSES Ashley Coble

I WAS ONE OF MANY BEWILDERED FRESHMEN **WANDERING THROUGH THE STACKS OF TEXTBOOKS** at the community college bookstore. I found the required books for English, government, American history and art appreciation. The title of the latter made me pause. What is Art? "Yes!" I thought to myself. "That makes sense. I have to have a clear definition of what art is if I'm gonna be an art major." Standing in the crowded aisle, I flung open the book and read the first sentence:

The only way to begin this book is to make clear that we are not going to arrive at any single answer to the question, What is art?

"What a rip-off!" I said to myself. "I'm not paying for this!"

The book was written by the legendary John Canaday, though I had no idea at the time who the author was. Years later I was better able to appreciate what Canaday was trying to say. Many scholars have tried to define what art is. All failed. Canaday simply dispensed with the matter and got on with what art historians generally agreed upon as the basics of art appreciation.

Some cultures have no word for art, much less a concept of artists or art museums. This does not mean they live without art. Art to them may be that blanket, this bowl or a carved idol. Taking such an object out of context and placing it on a pedestal in an art museum makes no sense in many cultures. In some cases, this would virtually destroy the object because its use as a blanket, bowl or idol is exactly what makes it art—or whatever they call it. On the other hand, there are examples of art whose purpose is not realized until the object is destroyed rather than preserved in a museum. Navaho sand paintings will not dispose of the malevolent spirits captured in the design until the artwork is gathered up and cast to the wind.

So why has every book on art appreciation, save Canaday's, attempted to define art even though the task is impossible? All the conflicting definitions make the field of art appreciation so, well, downright exacerbating. Canaday's outright dismissal of the question forced me to question how could I dedicate my entire adult life studying something that could not be defined?

Then I stumbled onto a different approach to this old problem. I was taking a doctoral course on the philosophy of music when my professor introduced me to Nelson Goodman's book on the Languages of Art. Goodman was wrestling with a much deeper philosophical issue about the nature of music, but something he said seemed to make sense of the "what is art?" question. Part of Goodman's reasoning was that music exists only as it is performed, thus he emphasized the when of music. Maybe we were asking the wrong question about art.. What if we asked **when** is art rather than **what**?

This sounds rather odd at first, I admit. But it makes sense if you consider those famous words, “One small step for [a] man...” At that precise moment, humans completed a journey from prehistoric troglodytes—grunting and pointing at gods and goddesses in the heavens—to modern beings with real estate on the moon. Luckily Neil Armstrong resisted an emphatic “Hi Mom!” wave at the camera. Or grasping the gravity of the moment, he didn’t look squarely at the lens and say, “Everybody on earth: this is a really, really, really, really important event in the course of human history!” That would not be an appropriate way to express the significance of the event. No, he uttered those remarkably simple yet extraordinarily poetic words we can all recite.

Now imagine the most brilliant rocket scientists sitting around a boardroom table at NASA. It is a final meeting where the last details are being wrapped up before liftoff. A blackboard behind them is crammed with hastily scrawled formulas and endless equations unintelligible to ordinary mortals.

“We’ve gone over the calculations again and again. We’ve tripled-checked the test data. We’ve consulted the weather charts. Everything is a go. Have we missed anything?” asks the lead scientist.

There is a moment of silence. Someone in the room, rather timidly, raises a hand. “This is a really big deal you know. Shouldn’t we . . . I don’t know . . . do something?”

“Like what?” another responds, looking up from his slide rule.

“I don’t know,” the first answers. “A ceremony or something. I mean, if we pull this off, this is a pretty big deal. Shouldn’t we plan to do something to mark the event?”

An even longer pause indicates a momentary loss of ideas. The most stellar minds of science gathered in one room, yet they are utterly stumped. They boldly devised a plan to forever alter mankind’s relationship to the universe, but they lack the means to express the significance of the event.

“How ‘bout a speech,” the lead scientist suggests.

“You mean a ‘Four score and twenty years ago’ sort of speech”? another wonders.

“Well, yeah,” the leader responds. “Something like that.”

“I was once in Toastmasters,” another interjected, “but I don’t feel qualified to write something of this magnitude. The entire world will be watching.”

They instantly realized that they had forgotten something necessary for the mission—they forgot about art.

An extraordinary occasion demands extraordinary language. Ordinary words or actions simply will not do. NASA had to look beyond the realm of science for the appropriate words, to poetry, to express the meaning of what they were about to do. NASA took ordinary language and made it extra-ordinary—poetic—so that everyone watching Neil Armstrong taking that famous step would know that what he was doing—indeed the moment we were experiencing—was significant. It had meaning.

That is when art happens.

Whenever we take something ordinary and make it extra-ordinary, we are making art. We do not normally talk in words like “One small step...” do we? Imagine giving your fast food order as, “Give me one cheeseburger with fries, hold the pickles—or give me death!” It would not make sense because ordering a cheeseburger is not a very meaningful event. Whatever is produced in this ordinary-to-extraordinary process is secondary to the human impulse to convey something meaningful. This is not so much a definition of art as it is recognition of the universal human desire to express meaning—and recognizing when it happens.

A graduate deserves a toast, which is an artful use of language. When people are married, we dress them in symbolic costumes. To honor the dead, we give the moment meaning with a eulogy. We commission monuments to mark a hallowed place where soldiers died, to commemorate a great leader, or to represent the abstract ideals of a nation. We gather for performances of dance, music, and drama not just to be entertained, but as a way of exploring what it means to be human.

Observe any important moment in the life of a person (a Bar Mitzvah, wedding, marriage, funeral) or a group of people (a declaration of war, proclamation of freedom, recognition of achievement), and art will happen. Indeed, the only way to give something any meaning whatsoever is through some form of artistic expression, be it through artful language, music, dance or the visual arts. We may not be able to define what art is, but we always know when it happens. Whenever an individual or group tries to communicate something is meaningful, that is when art happens.

Consider all the kinds of art used, for example, to perform High Mass in Saint Peter’s Cathedral. Remove every form of art and see what remains. Begin with painting and sculpture. There goes Bernini’s Baldacchino. What about music? No angelic chorale reverberating throughout the vaulted nave. What about dance?

No choreographed movement allowed: no solemn procession, ritual kneeling, or sign of the cross on one’s chest. What about literature? The Church’s magnificent liturgy must go, as does the Pope’s homily. As to the craft arts, there can be no bejeweled censer issuing incense or ring on the Pope’s finger. There is no hand-decorated Bible at the hand-carved pulpit either. In fact, there is no furniture at all. What about interior design and architecture? The inspirational wall and ceiling mosaics disappear along with the dome designed by Michelangelo. Costume design? The uniforms created

by Michelangelo for the Swiss Guard are gone, too, along with all the distinguishing vestments of the ranking clergy. No symbols of any sort—no ichtus, no chi-rho, not even a simple cross. Nothing is left but a large group of naked people standing in a big open space. How meaningful is that?

We convey our deepest sense of individual and communal identity through artful use of language, movement, dress, sound, image, and performance. Indeed there are no vehicles of meaning other than the arts. That is what the writer Henry Miller meant when he said, “Art teaches nothing, except the significance of life.”

We may not know what art is, but every culture knows when something meaningful is being expressed: Language is no longer just words, but a bond of marriage or a right of passage into adulthood. A bowl for serving rice becomes a symbolic vessel of life-giving forces. The tattoos on one’s body become more than decorative; they prove one’s birthright. The next time someone suggests that art is a luxury, imagine life without artistic expression. Imagine Neil Armstrong stepping onto the lunar surface in silence.



SCULPTURE Jon Russell



# Dreams

Denise Durian

His voice sounds like he is wearing yellow.  
Why are the rainbow colored ghosts in my bathtub?  
As the elevator headed to the bottom floor, it ended up in traffic on the 91 freeway.  
My dog is cooking dinner tonight.  
The lint on the carpet has smiling faces.  
Let's all go back to the Land of the Lost.  
The hairy tree stump wanted to go to the game.  
Rowing our boats through the sand was fun.  
The high school smells hard because the doors are red.  
The snail echoed as it entered the room.  
Did you hear what the flower said?  
Hello little flower, how was your flight?  
The bell was about to leave for the day.  
Susan ate the chair when she saw the red light.  
I can hear the taste of the chalkboard clearly.  
The rainbow landed on a pile of feathers.  
The wind was choking so much that it snagged.  
The cake was nagging the little red boy.  
Our coat tail wore the name tag so well.  
We had no mane tag for our coat tail.  
Genkua ze obyat Baubsha.  
He sounds fat.



SELF PORTRAITS Justin Houston

# New and Old

Sandra Herron

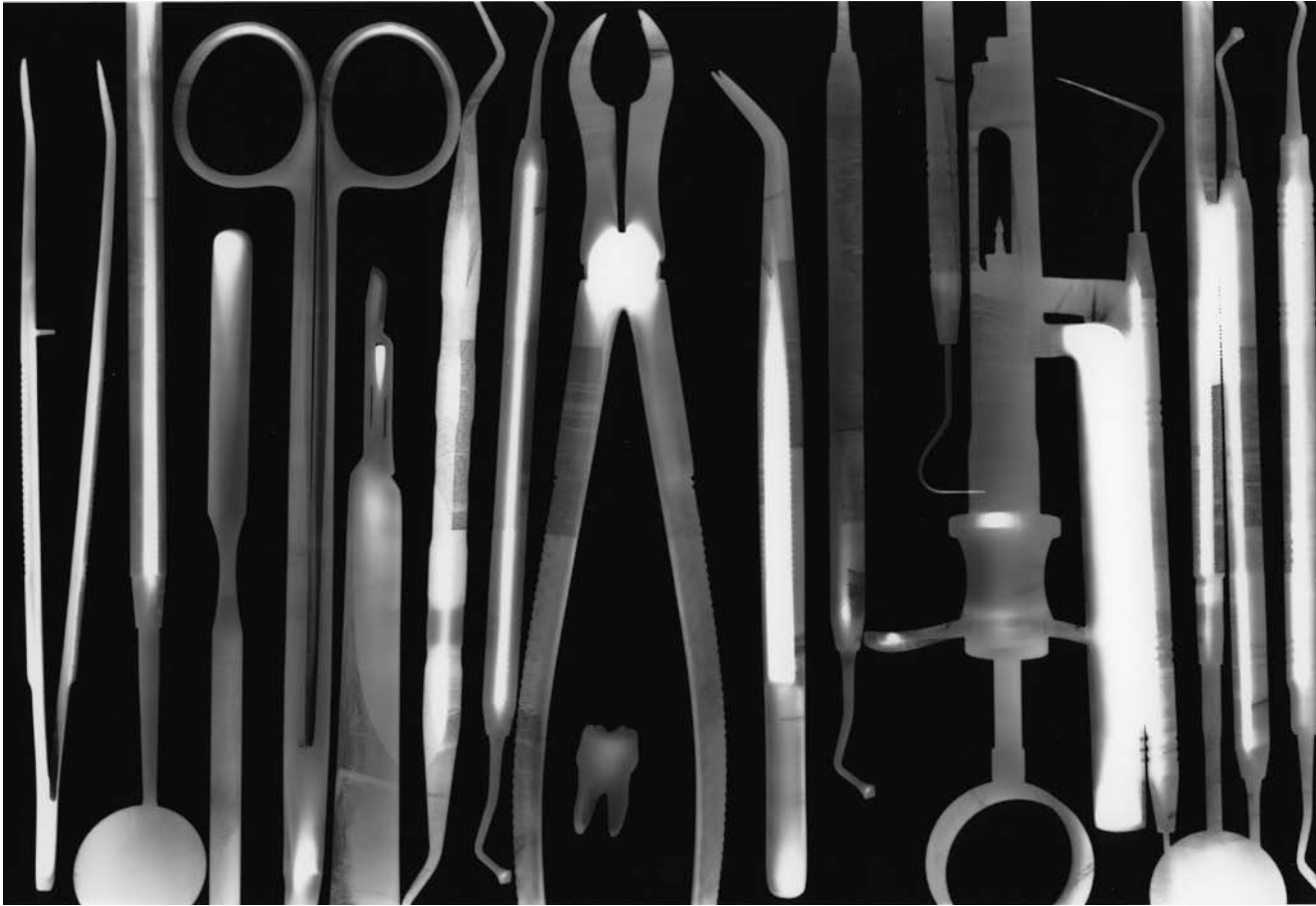
Friendly people, asking all kinds of questions;  
People interested  
In  
How is it, where I came from?

But I am busy looking  
At the tall elevators  
At the immense airport  
At the sterile brown buildings  
At the scary highways  
At the huge coke machines

Busy in a surrealistic city

Learning to speak  
A language without subjunctive  
A straightforward culture  
Where translations are bad  
And cognates don't work

Suddenly, a taste of home  
The Girl Scout cookies  
Sweet potatoes and rum



LITTLE PINCH Toni Hubbard

# Ode to Normalcy and Routine : ODE 3

Brian Shade

Century old oaks and greens mute the pain we feel  
At the hospital. My pod in the basement is colorless,  
A concentration camp.  
  
Photos of lost friends and lovers pierce my heart with sorrow and anger.  
Metal phones dangle on the wall.  
Who can I call? Who can relate?

My room isolates further, the bed hard, my body asexual.  
The north wind chills my nerves and cells relentlessly –  
A cactus bombarded with thorn and pricks.

Oversleeping and ice-cream weaken the pain, but thorns penetrate my dreams creating  
Impressionistic images.  
Covered with five blankets and a mouthpiece to stop grinding teeth. Waking up takes  
A couple of hours.

"Ha, ha," I chuckle sarcastically. "How much deeper can I go?"  
"I'll descend deeper like a bird or gladiator soars!"  
Then self-hatred erodes sadness, as waves on a powdery beach.

Weeks of surreal indecisiveness wane,  
Suddenly I trudge out of bed and my room,  
Reaching a new habitat called the ground floor.

Happiness begins  
To engulf me in  
Endless activity and colors:

Red roses, studly blue wranglers, and an army green windbreaker.  
Photos and art projects regain significance.  
Mom and Dad visit and we get fresh air by the oaks.

The new room is cozy, my attitude smoother, my appetite back.  
Bubble baths, warm food and Butternut cocoa.  
The basement and my thorns haunt me no more. "Now I'm stronger!"

Tomorrow's diversions make sleep an inconvenience.  
Rest arrives with one blanket, no mouthpiece,  
No toes pressed against the sheets like curled sausages.

Up at dawn, I have solutions for all: this patient needs Prozac,  
This one just music. I, meanwhile, get pumped with neurotransmitters so  
I'll stop flirting with nurses and chirping like a goofy cartoon.

Time, wisdom  
And doctors begin  
My road to normalcy.

Lithium, blood tests, more pills,  
Job applications, movies, board games-  
Ten some odd weeks later a routine emerges:

Breakfast, work, treadmill, Gatorade,  
Lunch, dinner, bridge, TV, Slurpees and fries-  
Perhaps even a book or a date.

Family and vocation save me.  
Exercise, endorphins, music and sunsets invigorate.  
Sports, gossip and the miscellaneous distract.

As bedtime approaches, I reflect  
"Did I survive or thrive another day?"  
My name is Jon Doe and I'm glad to be here.

# Tear

Jim Crawford

IT HAD BEEN ONLY **THREE YEARS AGO, WE WERE HIKING BRIGHT ANGEL TRAIL.** We had trudged the eight miles from the canyon rim down to the river when my complaining went over the top.

"My God, I can't feel my legs and I'm about to have a heat stroke. When I go, just cover me with rocks so the buzzards don't get me."

Laura just laughed and said, "Come on big boy. I'll carry the heavy pack. There's only a mile left to go."

Now, she lay in a hospital bed set up in our living room. The oxygen concentrator hummed and bubbled next to the bed. We had made this arrangement for the convenience of the hospice nurse who visited twice daily, and to accommodate the flow of visitors.

Her mother had struggled to convince me to make this arrangement. I thought that whenever Laura woke up, realizing where she was would be a horrible reminder of why she was there.

The last two years had been a series of losing one battle after another. The first battle was with vanity. Laura lost her hair, but no big deal. She still retained her natural grace and was the patient. Later, the side effects of chemo kept her from driving.

The battle for independence was the hardest for her. She held onto it for as long as she could, but when her sense of balance began to desert her, she had to rely on me to walk her to the bathroom, help her up and down, lift her in and out of the tub. I had to take control of her medications. The whole brain radiation affected her short term memory. I saw the frustration in her eyes when she would begin a sentence, but then couldn't remember the words she needed to complete it



MEETING MY SHADOW Tracy Dicks

The cancer even assaulted dignity. The hospice nurse recommended a catheter when her legs became too weak to support her. Laura hated the catheter. She confronted the nurse, making her promise not to use it, even if she might not be conscious to resist. She made me promise, too.

I carried her to the bathroom for a while, but even that became too difficult. We resorted to the diapers. Changing and bathing her didn't feel like a burden. It seemed more a privilege to be close enough to serve in that way without causing her embarrassment.

It had been longer than a day since I had seen her conscious and longer than that since she had been able to speak. I watched her as I changed the damp sheets, trying not to disturb her. I saw her grimace as I lifted and rolled her back onto the clean sheets. I said, "I'm so sorry, Honey." I didn't know if she could even hear me anymore. I had spoken quietly, but inside my mind I screamed contradictory prayers. "God, please, one more remission." And, "Please, God, take her now. Don't let her suffer anymore." I was ashamed I could conceive such a thought.

I was adjusting the sheets when I felt her hand lightly touch my arm. I looked. Her eyes were half open, but steady, and focused directly on mine. Searching. Searching, and then, consoling. A point of light reflected from a tear, hanging, balanced in the corner of her left eye. As her eyes closed, the tear slowly slid away.





# The Master's Work

Cinde Matkin Rawn

I STOOD AT THE BOTTOM OF THE GREAT GREY STAIRS **LEADING UP TO THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.** My breathing was shallow, as I had hurried past everything to get to this much-anticipated destination. Monet's work was behind those doors, and I could hardly wait to run up the stairs and burst into the exhibit. I decided to act like an adult, even though I felt childlike in my desire and glee; I managed to walk up the stairs with the same external composure of all those around me. Once I entered the exhibit hall the moment I had been waiting for came, almost too quickly. There before me was a Monet; in my memory, it was eight feet long. I stood in awe as I looked at the masterpiece; it is still beyond my ability to describe with words...my vocabulary too limited, or maybe the whole vocabulary of mankind is too limited for the masterwork that was before me. I stood, taking it in. And then, slowly, I was drawn forward. I walked as close as the thick brown velvet rope would allow, wanting to take in the fullness of the work before me. I leaned in, as close as a breath. I was shocked. It was a mass of wild, aggressive, random brush strokes that made no sense to my cognitive mind. The colors: a mass of confusion that looked like a first grader's attempt at mixing color. I leaned back from the rope; surely I was missing something. Nope; nothing there except a confusion of discordant colors. The caustic smear of burnt sienna, the angry jabs of indigo, and the sorrowful strokes of aubergine didn't seem to fit into this tranquil garden scene. I was so disappointed. I backed away, and as I did, the further back I moved, the more the masterwork began to make sense again. Its beauty returned, and with it my understanding of the master painter grew ever deeper. He knew what this budding artist hadn't a clue of; he knew that it took darkness to make the light colors burst forth; it took caustic sienna to cast the shadows for the effervescent orange and blue, indigo and aubergine played off the butter yellow and rich azure. It took all those conflicting colors to make a masterpiece. He, the master, knew that only with the darkest of color spotted here and there could the joyful painting have depth and beauty.

I know another Master, who seems to know ever so much about using the darkest of colors in our lives. Often times I rail at him, questioning how he can allow such darkness in life, how can sienna, indigo and umber be good for us? I shake my fist and question him, "Why won't you fix this dark mess?" After seeing Monet I received an answer to my litany of whys. I understood that I needed to hand over the dark paint filled brushes of my life, and let the Master paint them into this painting of me. As long as I hold onto the dark brushes, shaking them with my insistent impertinence, I stop the Master painter from using them to add depth, texture, and richness into my life story. When I hold onto them in anger or waiting for the Master to fix what is "clearly wrong," I lose the opportunity for these life experiences to enrich the colors of me; I remain flat, achromatic, shallow. So, now, on my good days, I find myself reaching into my hidden places and finding the darkest umbers and inky blacks, ready to turn them over so the Master can paint them into something beautiful.

# T-Shirt

Olga Y. King

LIVING IN A COUNTRY THAT AMERICANS USED TO CALL “COMMUNISTIC” **WAS AN EASY THING FOR A TWELVE-YEAR-OLD, ESPECIALLY IF YOU WERE FROM MOSCOW LIKE ME.** One had just a few duties to carry on: learn how to march and salute at festivities, study your young pioneer’s vow, and know your enemies. The last one was very important. Our official enemy was the “decadent, capitalistic West,” with its epicenter in the USA. I was lucky to grow up in the 80s - in the time my parents’ generation thankfully called “The Thaw.” To the Soviet mind, that meant “relax!” It was probably that sense of a new relaxation that made it possible for a t-shirt with the American flag and the word ‘Texas’ on it into my suitcase one summer when I was leaving Moscow to visit my grandparents in Kirgizstan.

My grandparents had lived in Kirgizstan since my grandfather was transferred there for army service in the ‘50s. My grandfather, born and raised in the Soviet Empire, was a dedicated and unyielding communist. He fled from hunger in the Ukraine under Stalin, only to fight for him in the Second World War and grieve for him when he finally died. The communist ideology had always been the fuel of his generation. Even in the time of “The Thaw,” grandpa would sing along with grandma in the car to all those lofty patriotic songs, while I was dying of shame from them in the backseat. Grandpa’s interest in politics made him well-informed about all bad news from the ‘Center of Evil.’ The treatment of blacks in the U.S., the horrors of the Vietnam War, obscene new dances with silly names like ‘rock-n-roll,’ free talk about the Western form of love called ‘sex,’ or assassinations among corrupt Western politicians all confirmed his belief that the Soviet Union really was the best place to be. Since I was a girl, talking with me about the news on TV was not appropriate. So, every time grandpa was watching TV, I was watching his face and reactions to the news to learn more about the world outside and him. Grandpa’s knowledge and competence earned him a strong reputation in our family. His word was law, and his decisions were unquestionable.

I remember one of his decisions. That summer I was spending my school vacation at their home in Kirgizstan like I had done since I was a baby. By that summer, “The Thaw” unofficially had taken effect for everyone who was wistfully awaiting it. My grandpa was not one of them. That summer evening, he was sitting at the table in our backyard waiting for his dinner and reading a newspaper. Tired from work, he stretched himself, smiled pleurably and took a long breath trying to catch all those flavors coming from the kitchen. Finally, grandma set the table and called me from the street for dinner. I galloped in, excited from the daily adventures and unable to calm down. I just started swallowing everything from my plate when the strangely stern voice of my grandpa made me freeze for a second.

“What’s that you’re wearing there?”

“My t-shirt,” I looked down and introduced my favorite piece of clothing.

“Where did you get it?” said the same slow, deep voice.

“My parents,” decided to use the shortest possible form of answer since my mouth was pretty busy with potatoes.

“Hmm...”

“What’s wrong with that shirt?” my grandma intervened.

“What’s wrong?!” We immediately stopped eating. “Don’t you see the American flag on it? And... what’s that? It even says ‘Texas’! See? Right there!”

“Oh! Mmm ... OK,” said grandma, peaceably considering the discussion to be over. I, for my part, saw the t-shirt already folded in my suitcase awaiting its flight back to Moscow in a couple of months.

“Take it off! I’m going to burn it in the oven,” grandpa stated. “No, wait!

After dinner! And I’m going to call your parents this weekend. I just can’t believe it! The American flag and then Texas!” he returned to his dinner. Now, the discussion was over.

I was speechless. I loved that t-shirt. It fulfilled all most important requirements of coolness out there, in my world, where “The Thaw” had just begun. First, it had more than two colors. Second, it didn’t deform or lose those colors after you washed it. And third, it had those magnificent non-Cyrillic letters on it: the letters not everyone could read. Those letters were crucial. Not only did they represent the forbidden world of capitalism with its supposed decomposing prosperity, social inequity, and high unemployment; they also demonstrated how close the owner of the clothes with such letters was to the forbidden world. Being close to that world was the unwritten law of coolness. After all, the white stars and red stripes on it, the symbol of viciousness, made the final touch and provided one with an aura of political disobedience. Now, I was supposed to say goodbye to that precious world.

Soon after dinner, though, grandpa’s mood changed. The meal, the rest, the warm shower and some good news on TV did their magical work on him and he decided to reverse his judgment. Instead of burning the t-shirt, he decided to throw it under the bench in our sauna and use it as his foot towel. This idea of a daily symbolic humiliation of our enemy appeared to him as a much better way to express his patriotism. I didn’t care about patriotism and suffered every time I went to the sauna and saw the shirt hanging lonely and sadly under the bench. Then, I wished he had burned it. However, I didn’t resent my grandpa’s ruling on the t-shirt issue. After all, I felt as if we were from different planets and my twelve-year-old vocabulary wasn’t good enough to explain that new complexity to him.

Sixteen years later, I introduced my American fiancé and his dad to my family in Moscow. When I told this story at our new family dinner, grandpa laughed with us and shook his head as he couldn’t believe it. “Good Lord, how life can change...” he said.

Sixteen months ago, my life brought me to Texas. Here, I bought a new t-shirt for my grandpa with the word “Texas” on it and sent it to him. He, being used to the stiffness of military clothes, had been trying to get used to this strange piece of clothing with incomplete sleeves and without buttons for about one year. Then, his life changed for the last time. In his memories he used to criticize the new world of Russian democracy, but, thanks to some of my stories from here, he also learned that one can have a pretty nice life in the world of predatory capitalism. My t-shirt reminded him of all those changes that one life can make.



WIRE SCULPTURE Tab Green



# Ode to the Working Man

Nicholas Bennett

I revere your skin  
As it glides through the fields,  
That glistening sheen  
Shines true of your health.

•  
36 •  
•  
I adore that sweat as  
it grants us asylum,  
A somatic glaze  
That stifles the heat.

I absorb your scent  
as it speaks of hard labor,  
exchanging free smiles  
At the sign of our strength.

I've learned to see  
in backlands and beauty,  
An alternate thinking  
That I will now praise.



SCULPTURE Jon Russell



HIDDEN BURRO Justin Houston



Skin-Pleasure:  
Mother-Genetics

Tiffany Herron

This skin does not please you?  
The way I am  
Drenched  
In the inevitable outcome  
That Mother-Genetics soaked me in?

My green eyes only  
Fill that river dancing side.  
But! For my hourglass curves  
You say it does not please

38 • You?  
• You want EVIDENCE, please.  
Because every introduction  
Is a violation of your cookie-cutter's  
Pamphlet information.

While I soak  
In the brand of a mutt; a mix  
I remain a proud Latina.  
A pale Latina.

So, this skin does not please you?  
The way you are  
Jealous  
With the fact I stand an  
International Diva

My blood, while crossing oceans,  
Colliding with your envious waves on the  
American shore  
Is all the evidence I have  
To please you.



LIMBO Mirtha Aertker

Jesus, Squirrely and  
Starbucks

Julia Calderara

AVA HAD OVERSLEPT. AGAIN.

Her childhood plastic pony alarm clock flashed in bold, block red digital numbers 7:32. Ava needed to arrive at work by nine, no later. She knew she couldn't be late, not for the fourth Monday in a row. Of course, Ava had amazing excuses for her constant tardiness and absences: food poisoning from undercooked shellfish, a broken axel after driving her pick-up into a ditch, and excruciatingly painful menstrual cramps. Normally, Ava wouldn't complain to her boss about her cramps, but she needed a good excuse on that particular Monday because her boss had just found out his boyfriend was cheating on him with another man. The second she said "...and the cramps just kept coming and coming..." her boss stopped asking questions. She remembered his fierce blue eyes bulging and his mouth stretching into a huge 'O'. But she didn't dare arrive late again.

Ava forced her thin body up and out of the bed to the mirror. She checked both sides of her face, smiled to see her teeth and flipped her long natural blonde hair forward and back once. For her job she was expected to look her best, but she couldn't go without her usual cup of Starbucks coffee.



Every morning before work she got her caffeine fix from the siren in green. Besides, she didn't really need to take a shower or put on makeup. Unlike some of the girls at the university, Ava didn't damage her skin by using tanning beds. With a quick cherry-flavored lip-gloss application, she was ready to get to Starbucks and then to work.

Ava fumbled for her keys in her purse as she skipped to her apartment door to leave. She kicked the heavy door open and let it shut hard behind her. Her silky hair almost got caught. She touched the thick blonde strands with her hands and looked at the freshly cut ends, just to make sure. The next door neighbor's kid lost his finger that way. Ava felt the kid deserved it after all the screaming and fussing and racket he made during his temper tantrums.

She just happened to witness the event. For all the energy the kid put into his tantrums, she felt he could've at least been able to get all his extremities through the door before it closed. The tip of his pinky finger just popped off his tiny hand like a cap off a soda bottle. It even sounded similar... a sort of "thunking" sound. The blood streamed out of his mutilated finger like a toy squirt gun. Ava was shocked to find out the kid could scream even louder than he usually did. Being an only child and not really good with kids, she felt pretty proud of herself when she picked the amputated finger tip off of the cement, went into her apartment, grabbed a plastic baggy, stuck the bleeding finger in, zipped it up and handed it to his unaware mother inside their apartment. On her way out, she patted the kid on the head and said, optimistically, "Hey, it could've been your whole hand! They'll be able to sew it back on," and covered her ears from his cacophony and went on with her day. Blood still stained the particular spot where it happened.

Once Ava arrived at her new white Ford pick-up truck in the parking lot, she noticed the truck bed's cover lid shifted a little too far to the left and her bed's back door hinged open. The back door never seemed to stay up since she went off-roading with a few of her friends. When she got her next pay check she'd get it fixed. She figured she could last a few more weeks with it broken; the lid concealed the truck bed's contents well enough.

Her dad had asked her if she wouldn't mind keeping his Christmas lawn decorations at her place until they had settled in from the move. Ava didn't mind a few Christmas lights, but when her dad dropped off the infamous six-foot-tall, human-haired, silicone-made, imitation Jesus donned in a purple cloak, she started caring. She didn't dare place him in her living room; she didn't know what her friends would think, so she placed him in her closet. But every time she opened it she jumped five feet back in surprise when she saw his outstretched arms and his dark brown eyes lasering at her. She decided to keep him and his accompanying decorations in the back of her truck until her dad was ready to claim them back. She hoped it would be soon. She hated the thing. But Ava had hated it much more when her parents proudly displayed the silicone Jesus outside their home when she lived there. Her parents always had to make a "statement," so they strategically placed him by the mailbox. They moved his jointed-arms in a greeting position and had him lean slightly on the mailbox. Her dad even went so far as to chain Jesus' feet to the mailbox, so no one would steal him. She could still picture her father as a teenager, going outside to brush Jesus' long human-made hair with her mom's brush. Sometimes he braided it. Sometimes he gave Jesus a

mohawk. Sometimes he gave Jesus a pony-tail. One time, he bought a mullet wig for Jesus to wear and forced the next door neighbor to take a picture of the whole family around him for their Christmas cards. Her dad had made the whole family wear identical mullet wigs. He also hyper-extended Jesus' flexible fingers to form a "peace" sign and instructed her and her mom to make a peace sign as well. Ava didn't smile in the picture.

She tried to tell her parents that displaying Jesus like that was very "white-trashy." Her parents laughed and responded that they were, after all, "good country people." Ava didn't have the heart to tell her parents that their "country" town was transforming into "suburbia." She personally felt her town was going through an identity-crisis once the new Wal-Mart and Starbucks popped up across the street from Moe's Diner.

Ava smirked to herself as she shoved the truck bed door closed and went around to the driver's side. She ran her slender fingers along her latest splurge, her grill guard, before she stepped in.

When the truck's engine rattled on and the radio clock flashed 8:00 A.M, Ava became aware of the time again. She peeled out of her apartment complex and onto the open road. Starbucks was only a few miles down. If she sped, she'd make it onto the highway and to work on time. She could almost taste the cold mocha.

A squirrel ran in front of Ava's car before she pulled into the drive-thru, but Ava couldn't stop or she'd be late. Ava braced herself and ran the squirrel over. She looked back briefly, only to see its gray tail stuck to her left back tire. The body, tailless now, trembled furiously on the hard black concrete. Through the rearview mirror Ava watched it twitch its little arms toward the sky, like it was praying. It kind of reminded Ava of Mabel at church during worship. It wasn't dead. Its gray-colored tail waved in the wind beautifully, like a furry flag, every time the wheel spun closer and closer towards the drive-thru monitor. Ava hoped it would die. She didn't want to think that the maimed squirrel wouldn't fit in with its little squirrel friends now that it didn't have a tail. But she had to make sure, for the squirrel's sake. She reversed and ran over it again. She cringed, for just a second, when she heard a hissing "pop" followed by the "thunk" of its small body hitting her bumper after she shifted back into drive.

"Poor Squirrelly! I ran over a squirrel so you might have to send somebody out there to clean it up!" Ava yelled into the drive-thru monitor. She paused, to ponder the endless options of coffee. "Oh, okay, I'm ready. I'll take the Venti-sized iced white chocolate macadamia nut mocha!"

"Oh...all right...okay, um I have one Venti iced white macadamia nut... is that it?"

"Yup."

Ava drove up and claimed her cup of caffeine that satisfied her addiction. She smelled the coffee in the cool air that evaporated from the ice cubes. The mixture of the cool ice and still-warm coffee soothed her throat all the way down. She felt the first sip settle nicely in her still-empty stomach.

"Dear Jesus let me make it to work on time," she prayed aloud. She paused, halfway in prayer, to take a sip from her coffee. Ava looked at the cup, cocked her head to the side, and nodded in approval. She smacked her lips and ran her tongue around the lid of the coffee. Her eyes quivered in satisfaction. "If you do, I'll love you forever."

As she pulled back onto the street, she heard the bed truck hinge open again. Ava cursed and shook her head, but she didn't have time to fix it.

By the time she entered the highway she sang and bopped along to Aretha Franklin, almost forgetting the back door was open. Ava noticed the cars around her getting out of the way of her and her truck. The smaller Mustangs and BMWs and other city cars swerved either to the left or to the right of her vehicle. It did take a few cars a little bit longer to get out of the way, but eventually, they all dispersed in either direction. It reminded Ava of Moses parting the Red Sea.

"Thank you, Almighty One! R-E-S-P-E-C-T!" Ava yelled as she clutched her coffee in her right hand and the wheel in the left. She slapped the wheel a few times as she sang. The ice cubes danced in unison to the beat. "Thank you, Starbucks!"

Everyone on the road seemed to have their cell phones glued to their ears. Ava took great interest in looking at their facial expressions and hand gestures from her rearview window. They all seemed to look mad and disgusted. Ava thought she'd probably feel mad and disgusted too if she had to work in a cubicle. The radio clock flashed 8:53 A.M. as she pulled into the mall parking lot. Ava slammed the door shut and ran across the lot, happy Jesus had gotten her there on time. Ava wouldn't get fired today. She raised her hands to heaven as she skipped inside to work.

"I'm here!" Ava sing-sang as she entered.

"Finally," her boss grumbled. "Go clock in and start hanging up those dresses over there."

Ava nodded eagerly.

She continued to hum to Aretha Franklin as she hung the dresses in color-coded order. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Nikki, another co-worker, walk in late. Ava couldn't help but smile.

"You're late," Ava's boss hissed.

"I know, but there is this huge commotion outside, police cars and everything, and I had to park on the other side of the mall!" Nikki paused to lower her voice. Ava

perked up at the possible controversy and concentrated hard on her words. But she couldn't hear from across the store. After Nikki finished telling her alibi, both Nikki and her boss stared at her. Nikki wrinkled her nose like something smelled and her boss looked like he was about to vomit. Ava didn't think anything of it. Until the men in blue and gold swarmed around Ava like buzzing locusts and demanded she had to come with them.

"What?" Ava asked confused. Her cheeks flushed a crimson red. Sweat formed at her brow. Starbucks still in hand, she ducked her head in embarrassment as they dragged her outside. Ava overhead Nikki tell her boss "I told them the truck was hers."

"Explain this," one officer said as he pointed to the back of her truck once they arrived at the parking lot.

The Christmas decoration-filled plastic trash bags billowed out like a parachute where the bed door fell. Rope coiled loosely down, like a serpent. And silicone, life-sized, realistically human Jesus' arms hung lifeless and draped over the back a good two feet outward. The trash bags cleverly hid all but his long brown mane and arms. Squirrelly's fresh blood coated a small section of the back left end of the truck. The pasty blood oozed and dripped down the fine human hairs on Jesus' silicone arms. The blood contrasted against the white paint of her truck. It almost looked like it had a candy-cane painted decal.

"I-I ran over a squirrel on my way to work," Ava breathed out. Her hands shook by her side. Her head bobbed up and down. Her eyes darted from the left to the right side of the truck as she watched the officers take blood samples and pictures.

After the officers took down her information, they left her alone with Jesus. She heard one officer whisper to another officer on their way to their flashing vehicle, "These sick country-folk. They sometimes make me reconsider certain parts of the first amendment."

Ava took a huge swig of her coffee and peered at the damage she had caused to Jesus. She peered down at his blood-stained face and his glossy brown eyes before she pulled her father's ruined; blood stained Jesus out of the back by his hair and dragged him across the parking lot to the dumpster.

She thought about her father, and what he would do when he found out. She thought about what Nikki and her boss would say. She thought about trading her truck in for a more conservative Honda.

She sighed. At least Jesus had gotten her to work on time.

With a jump and a push, Jesus disappeared into the depths of the hulking green metal trash composite. She smacked her hands together afterwards, in an attempt to rid her hands of Squirrelly's blood. But she couldn't rid herself of it. No matter how hard she tried.



OVERWHELMED Tracy Dicks

# Why Students Drop – According to Students

Ted McFerrin as dictated to R. Scott Yarbrough

EDITOR'S NOTE: **THIS PIECE WAS TED'S FINAL PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATION TO THE TEXAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE TEACHER'S ASSOCIATION.** AT THE TIME, TED WAS IN THE FINAL BATTLE WITH CANCER AND PREFERRED TO STAY BUSY AND IN THE LOOP. THE PAPER WAS READ IN HIS STEAD AT THE CONFERENCE. IT SHOULD BE MENTIONED, TED NEVER "GAVE UP" ON ANY STUDENT.

WE ALL KNOW THE PROBLEM: STUDENTS DROP, **BUT WE'RE NEVER QUITE SURE WHY.** My colleague, Ted McFerrin undertook this study under duress; three of his five classes had come under scrutiny by administration due to drop rates. Ted is a good teacher and is well-liked and has a good reputation. Therefore, part of the original thought was that the courses were troubled simply because of the nature of the offering: the course was Technical Writing, and several were coupled with Distance Learning. Still, Ted could feel an administrative push to find an answer and "fix it." Thus, I thought it rather brave for Ted to see the research as a challenge rather than as a direct personal insult; we all have students drop.

Ted first approached the problem by looking to the experts, current research, and trends, assuming through statistics he might find a plug-in, pat answer. Becoming increasingly frustrated by the fact that Ted felt that the research continued to exhibit an attitude that was "certainly the professor must be the cause of the waning numbers," Ted decided to do something rather radical and proactive. His question: why not ask the real students who drop the real reasons they drop and what can/could the college do/or have done to change/or alter that decision?

Research and Ted's study revealed some overlapping conclusions; obviously, certain responsibilities fall on the shoulders of the faculty, advising, admissions, financial aid, and administration, and each group is quick to point the finger while ignoring the thumb that is pointed back at themselves: "Surely it must be the faculty." "Surely it must be the students. Kids these days." "Surely the administration is out of the loop. They haven't been in the classroom in twenty years so what do they know." "Advising must have dropped the ball." All could very well be true; the student may have dropped because of a lack of discipline on their part, or they may have disliked the instruction or instructor, or they may have changed majors, or a work schedule, or received misguided advising, or been dropped for lack of payment, or had boyfriend/girlfriend problems, classes too early, or classes too late, or the teacher might have been "mean." Still, there was more. Mixed with this myriad of excuses or shortfalls, some of the evidence is contradictory, an oxymoron unto itself: half the students want more attention while the other half want less; the instructor is not tough enough or the instructor is too difficult; or the teacher is too reactive or too proactive; or the teacher stays on the subject too much or the teacher strays from the subject, or the teacher is too personal or not personal enough. WHAT TO DO?



Thus, Ted took it upon himself to follow his classes for two years Fall, Spring, and Summer semesters targeting English 2311 (Technical Writing offered both as a traditional class and as distance learning), but he didn't provide surveys telling the student what to think but rather left it wide open instead. Each semester, as one project, the students were asked to complete a roundtable discussion with tabulated results and honest answers as to why students had dropped classes in the past. Some of the results coincided but other results simply churn already muddy water, adding even more surprising reasons to an already unmanageable list.

See which reasons you expect and ones you don't and decide what we are to draw from this convoluted reaction to a seemingly simple question. The following are listed as A) most common answers Ted received to B) fairly common and C) on occasion as reasons determining dropping a class.

- A
1. Need more on campus housing so it would be convenient to get to class

2. Offer classes when they are convenient to the student rather than convenient for the instructor or the institution

3. Cost of books and the lack of the use of those books

4. Filler Classes

5. Grant or Tuition/drop in order to avoid loss of grant money

6. Poor food service or lack of availability

7. Transportation issues including bus schedules, convenience of parking, space and distance in the parking lots from building

8. Not enough communication with the students via e-mail, telephone (immediate response to questions and problems)

9. Offer class locations more convenient to students



- B
1. Not enough information on the professors profiles and ratings going in (myprofessor.com)

2. Students should lead orientation or at least have input into the orientation process

3. Lack of access (again immediate) to resource information: schedules, times, etc . . .

4. Not enough assessment before being placed in classes (I couldn't believe this one)

5. Students should be held more accountable for attendance and assignments

- C
1. Teachers don't vary teaching style enough/too much lecture/stray from the topic

2. Teachers expect students to change and adapt while students expect teachers to motivate

3. Instructors need more supervision and should be held accountable

4. Lecturers should have English language skills

5. Establish and adhere to a strict attendance policy

6. Students should be held accountable

Thus the answer is wonderfully opaque; it boils down to the reason I don't like topics that become blame games. There is no certain answer because humanity and discipline and desire and age and responsibility and expectations and world events and hurricanes and tsunamis and earthquakes and health issues and the economy and personal life choices and frustration and moves and job opportunities and simple human will or lack of will all become factors. Perhaps the easiest comparison is the same as asking why one marriage works as opposed to one that doesn't. Somewhere is a mutual respect; somewhere is a two-way passion for the content; somewhere is a two-way willingness to succeed rather than a determination to fail; somewhere is a willingness to compromise but a determination never to settle.

Therefore, Ted and I decided that the real reason students drop – Well, it depends . . . It is like the irony of cancer and who it chooses as its bedmate: we have some idea, but it certainly would not hurt to treat each case individually and with a respect for the individual as an individual rather than as the disease. In fact, Ted said one way he improved his drop rate dramatically was simply to tell the students during the first class day, "Talk to me before you drop the class. There may be something we can do." Then, he added, laughing, "but some students . . . they need to drop." Some do, and that's another problem and another paper.

